DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 796 CS 207 594

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TITLE Anonymous Attribution in "Time" and "Newsweek": Frequency and Form.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (66th, Corvallis, OR, August 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Analysis; *Information Sources; *Journalism; Media Research; *News Reporting; *Periodicals
IDENTIFIERS *Anonymous Attribution; Newsweek; Time Magazine

ABSTRACT

One issue each of "Time" and "Newsweek" from each month of 1982 was selected at random and content analyzed to determine the use of anonymous attribution. Stories from the "National/Nation" and "International World" sections were analyzed for use of anonymous sources, that is a direct or paraphrased quote attributed to an unnamed person or unnamed persons. For each story, several items were noted: the presence or absence of anonymous sources, the number of different anonymous sources quoted, the total number of anonymous attributions, and the types of anonymous sources quoted. Of the 388 stories analyzed, 216 stories dealt with national events and issues, while 172 stories dealt with international events and issues. Results revealed the use of 1,274 unattributed quotations. "Newsweek" tended to quote unnamed sources more often than did "Time." Overall, more than eight in ten stories contained anonymous attribution with unnamed sources quoted more often in international stories than in national stories. High status sources were quoted most often, followed by neutral sources, subordinates, experts, friends or foes, and associates. Some "official" was the most common specific source quoted, followed by aides, diplomats, and experts. "Newsweek" quoted officials and sources more often and advisers less often than did "Time." The findings suggest that the abuses of the anonymous source practice by Janet Cooke and others have not prompted the reporters, writers, and editors at "Time" and "Newsweek" to restrict their use of anonymous attribution. (HOD)

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ED229796

MAGAZINE DIVISION

ANONYMOUS ATTRIBUTION IN "TIME" AND "NEWSWEEK": FREQUENCY AND FORM

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CS 207 594

Presented to the Magazine Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, August, 1983.

The quoting of unnamed sources in news stories is relatively common. While some journalists look upon the practice as a "necessary evil," others clearly believe it is not necessarily evil. The purpose of this study was to examine the use of anonymous attribution by journalists who apparently have the least objection to the practice--journalists who work for "Time" and "Newsweek."

Most major codes of ethics in journalism caution against the overuse of anonymous sources, but recognize there are times when granting anonymity to a source is the only way to get necessary information.[1] Most college textbooks on reporting and ethics in journalism recommend complete source identification unless a source's identity must be protected, because naming sources helps build credibility.[2] The authors report that granting confidentiality too freely to sources can often result in the conveying of distorted, self-serving information and the suppressing of news.

Granting confidentiality to sources can have desirable effects, though. Besides helping to obtain information that would be otherwise unavailable, the practice can help "cultivate" sources and "build a trust" that encourages sources to talk more freely and candidly.[3] The practice can speed up the process of acquiring information, lead to tips and "inside" information and give comfort and confidence to a fearful source and his colleagues.[4]

Critics of the practice had a field day with the Janet Cooke incident.[5] They noted a loss of public trust and confidence in the news media, cautioned against the overuse of anonymous sources and suggested that reporters and editors follow more rigorous standards when granting confidentiality to sources.

While recent research shows that newspeople report they are becoming more careful and rigorous in their use of anonymous sources,[6] research also shows that news consumers are not overly concerned or upset about the practice. They give fairly high credibility ratings to unnamed sources.[7] They recognize the "cloaking" of sources and accept the practice.[8] They perceive a controversial story to be most accurate and fair when no sources are quoted as opposed to when an unnamed source, named source or two opposing named sources are quoted.[9]

One possible explanation for why the quoting of anonymous sources seems to be so accepted is that it occurs so regularly, especially in stories about the government.[10] In fact, reporters in Washington, D.C. have said approximately 28% of their interviews are "off-the-record."[11] One study found that anonymous sources were quoted in about 33% of newspaper stories.[12] Another study of newspaper stories about social issues found that 61% of all sentences had no attribution and 10% of the sentences that contained opinions, inferences or judgments had no attribution.[13]

To date, most of the research on anonymous sources has dealt with newspapers, but one study has examined the use of such sources in "Time" and "Newsweek."[14] Culbertson analyzed 12 issues of both magazines and

found that 70% of "Newsweek" stories and 75% of "Time" stories quoted "veiled" sources. In all, he discovered 2,030 veiled attribution phrases. "High-Status" sources were quoted most often, followed by "subordinates" of officials and "experts."

Culbertson suggested that more often than not anonymous sources were quoted to "validate and personalize" general information and to "broaden" the appeal and impact of specific information. He also mentioned that having to deal with so many bureaucratic sources and promoting an "investigative, interpretive" image also contributed to the frequent quoting of unnamed sources in both newsmagazines. Others have supported his observations.[15]

Culbertson's research was conducted during a time when the use of anonymous sources was still basking in the glow of respectability generated by the news media's performance during the Watergate affair. This study was an attempt to determine if the clouds of disrepute spawned by the Janet Cooke incident had diminished that glow somewhat and affected the use of anonymous sources in "Time" and "Newsweek."

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two primary research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How often are anonymous sources quoted in newsmagazine stories?
2. What types of anonymous sources are quoted?

METHODS

One issue of "Time" and "Newsweek" from each month of 1982 was selected at random and content analyzed. The 12 issues were the same dates for each publication.[16] Only stories from the "National/Nation" and "International/World" sections were analyzed.[17]

For each story, several items were noted:

1. The presence or absence of anonymous sources.
2. The number of different anonymous sources who were quoted.
3. The total number of anonymous attributions.
4. The "types" of anonymous sources who were quoted.

The "use" of anonymous sources was defined as attributing a direct or paraphrased quote to an unnamed single person or to unnamed plural persons.[18] The source "type" was determined using categories developed by Culbertson.[19] They were: Association, High Status, Neutral, Subordinates, Pro/Con and Experts.

In all, 388 stories were analyzed(197 "Time", 191 "Newsweek"); 216 stories dealt with national events and issues(105 "Time", 111 "Newsweek"); 172 stories dealt with international events and issues(92 "Time", 80 "Newsweek").

FINDINGS

Anonymous sources were quoted in 315 stories(81%)--152(77%) "Time", 163(85%) "Newsweek". (X^2=4.25, df=1, p=.04) See FIGURE 1

Anonymous sources were quoted in 163(76%) of the national stories--74 (71%) "Time", 89(80%)"Newsweek". (X^2=2.74, df=1, p=.09) Anonymous sources were quoted in 152(88%) of the international stories--78(85%)"Time", 74(93%)"Newsweek". (X^2=2.48, df=1, p=.12)[20]

An average of 2.6 different anonymous sources were quoted per story--2.4 "Time", 2.8 "Newsweek". (T=1.48, p=.14) An average of 2.3 different anonymous sources were quoted in national stories--2.0 "Time", 2.5 "Newsweek". (T=1.61, p=.11) An average of 3.1 different anonymous sources were quoted in international stories--3.0 "Time", 3.3 "Newsweek". (T=.74, p=.47)

In all,1,274 unattributed quotations were included in the 388 stories--583 "Time", 691 "Newsweek". (T=1.59, p=.11) There were 585 unattributed quotations in the 216 national stories--245(2.3 per story) "Time", 340(3.1) "Newsweek". (T=1.66, p=.10) There were 689 unattributed quotations in the 172 international stories--338(3.7) "Time", 351(4.4) "Newsweek". (T=.96, p=.34)

Approximately 39% of the quoted anonymous sources were "High Status," 25% were "Neutral," 15% were "Subordinates," 11% were "Experts," 6% were "Pro/Con" and 4% were "Associates." See TABLE 1 The differences between "Time" and "Newsweek" were not significant. (X^2=8.63, df=5, p=ns)

Approximately 37% of the quoted anonymous sources in national stories were "High Status," 24% were "Subordinates," 18% were "Neutral," 9% were "Experts," 7% were "Pro/Con" and 5% were "Associates." The differences between the magazines were not significant. (X^2=10.35, df=5, p=ns)

Approximately 41% of the quoted anonymous sources in international stories were "High Status," 31% were "Neutral," 12% were "Experts," 8% were "Subordinates," 5% were "Pro/Con" and 3% were "Associates." Again, the differences between the magazines were not significant. (X^2=7.92, df=5, p=ns)

Different "officials" of one type or another were quoted most often, followed by aides, diplomats, experts, sources, staffers and advisers.[21] See TABLE 2 Overall, "Newsweek" quoted officials and sources more often than did "Time" and "Time" quoted advisers more often than did "Newsweek." (X^2=16.87, df=6, p=.01) In national stories, "Newsweek" quoted officials, experts, sources and staffers more often than did "Time" and "Time" quoted advisers more often than did "Newsweek." (X^2=14.77, df=6, p=.05) In international stories, "Newsweek" quoted staffers more often and experts less often than did "Time." (X^2=12.43, df=6, p=.06)

The "officials" quoted included: U.S. officials, administration officials, some key officials, Reagan officials, White House officials, senior officials, top officials, high officials, top policy officials, State Department officials, Pentagon officials, Federal officials, well-placed officials, FBI officials, defense officials, U.N. officials, dismayed officials, amazed officials, worried officials and officials from a variety of countries and organizations.

The "aides" quoted included: White House aides, Reagan aides, top aides, senior aides, administration aides, Senate aides, House aides, exasperated aides and aides for a variety of public and private officials.

The "diplomats" quoted included: French diplomats, Israeli diplomats, Arab diplomats, British diplomats, European diplomats, Western diplomats, Iranian diplomats, Asian diplomats, Peking diplomats, West German diplomats, senior diplomats, Moscow-based diplomats and high-ranking diplomats.

The "experts" quoted included: defense experts, Mafia experts, foreign-policy experts, White House experts, intelligence experts, U.S. experts, thoughtful experts, military experts, FBI experts, Pentagon experts, Middle East experts, Latin America experts and political experts.

The "sources" quoted included: Congressional sources, official sources, sources who know, Western sources, well-placed sources, administration sources, knowledgeable sources, U.S. sources, military sources, British Government sources, Communist Party sources, law enforcement sources, Capitol Hill sources and diplomatic sources,

The "staffers" quoted included: Senate staffers, Democratic staffers, U.N. staffers, White House staffers, government staffers, Congressional staffers, ruffled staffers, angry staffers, laconic staffers and staffers for a variety of officials and organizations.

The "advisers" quoted included: White House advisers, Reagan advisers, Presidential advisers, government advisers, West German advisers and advisers for a variety of individual officials.

Some of the more exotic unnamed sources included: a plump, fortyish food vendor, standing in her tin- and plastic-sided stall in Managua's Mercado Oriental; one of Reagan's handlers; one beery young man; one of the 150 or so people who were attending the lunchtime concert; spymasters;

pundits; one dazed observer; the wife of a local pharmacist; a weathered old man; a man with an earring; one frequent dinner guest; one grizzled workingman with a red bandana on his neck; a well-to-do Beirut woman; a doctor who examined the body of one of the dead; a rich, young acquaintance of the Pulitzer's; an exulted Christian Democratic deputy; one of his inquisitors; one participant at a chicken-salad lunch at Camp David on Saturday, Aug. 14; the boy soldier, a longtime Bohemian; a cynical professor of social science at San Salvador's Central American University; a regular at the poker table; a woman waiting in a long line at one downtown Warsaw supermarket; one newly radicalized young patriot; a young fighter pilot who, like many Iranians, had been trained in the U.S.; and a 22-year-old Israeli who lived in one of the illegal settlements in the northern Sinai.

DISCUSSION

The quoting of unnamed sources was a very common practice in "Time" and "Newsweek." In the 24 issues analyzed, 1,274 anonymous quotations were identified. "Newsweek" tended to quote unnamed sources more often than did "Time."

Overall, more than eight of ten stories contained anonymous attribution. Unnamed sources were quoted more often in international stories than in national stories and more "Newsweek" than "Time" stories contained anonymous attribution.

"High Status" sources were quoted most often, followed by "Neutral" sources, "Subordinates," "Experts," "Friends & Foes" and "Associates." "High Status" sources and "Neutral" sources were quoted more often and "Subordinates" less often in international stories than in national stories.

Some "offical" was the most common specific source quoted, followed by "aides," "diplomats" and "experts." "Newsweek" quoted officials and sources more often and advisers less often than did "Time."

Since the types of stories analyzed in this study were more restricted than those in the Culbertson study, direct comparisons should be done with caution. It is clear, however, that the use of anonymous sources in "Time" and "Newsweek" is still very common. Apparently the abuses of the practice by Janet Cooke and others have not prompted the reporters, writers and editors at "Time" and "Newsweek" to restrict their use of anonymous attribution.

One rationale for the frequent quoting of unnamed sources was offered by R. Edward Jackson, deputy chief of correspondents for "Time."[22] Jackson said such sources were quoted only when the information they provided was felt to be true and justified by other reporting. He added that, actually, unnamed sources are really not anonymous, because "Time" knows who they are.

Finally, while it wasn't a part of this study to analyze the type of information attributed to unnamed sources, an informal analysis tends to confirm Culbertson's observations. Anonymous quotes seemed to be used to validate and personalize general information and to broaden the appeal and significance of specific, localized information. Such quotes seemed

often to be used to add "color" and to give an impression of being "inside information." This, too, is in keeping with Culbertson's observations that unnamed attribution tended to be used to connote and support the "investigative, interpretive" image that both "Time" and "Newsweek" try to cultivate.

NOTES

[1] Society of Professional Journalists/SDX, "Code of Ethics;" American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Statement of Principles;" Associated Press Managing Editors, "Association Code of Ethics;" National Association of Broadcasters, "Radio Code."

[2] John Brady, The Craft of Interviewing (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1976), pp. 108-121; Michael Ryan and James W. Tankard, Jr., Basic News Reporting (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 192-197; Herbert Strentz, News Reporters and News Sources (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1978), p. 69; Melvin Mencher, News Reporting and Writing (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1977), pp. 34-47; William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), pp. 172-173; John L. Hulteng, Playing It Straight (Chester: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1981), p. 65-67; John L. Hulteng, The Messenger's Motives (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), pp. 85-105; John L. Hulteng, The News Media: What Makes Them Tick? (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), pp. 56-57; Bruce M. Swain, Reporter's Ethics (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1978), pp. 48-49.

[3] Delmer D. Dunn, Public Officials and the Press (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 44-45; Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), pp. 42-46.

[4] George S. Hage, Everette E. Dennis, Arnold H. Ismach and Stephen Hartgen, New Strategies for Public Affairs Reporting (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), pp. 52-53; Paul N. Williams, Investigative Reporting and Editing (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), pp. 63-64.

[5] Cynthia Bolbach, "The Janet Cooke Affair: Journalistic Ethics and Confidential Sources," The Christian Century, 98:826-829, (August 26/ September 2, 1981); "The Pulitzer Fake--The Echoes Linger," U.S. News & World Report, 90:11, (April 27, 1981); Bill Green, "Janet's World," Washington Post, 104:A12-A15, (April 19, 1981); Naomi Munson, "The Case of Janet Cooke," Commentary, 72:46-50, (August, 1981); Alvin P. Sanoff, "Uneasy Press Sets Out to Refurbish Its Image," U.S. News & World Report, 90:71-72, (June 29, 1981); James A. Michener, "On Integrity in Journalism," U.S. News & World Report, 90:80,79, (May 4, 1981); Norman E. Issacs, "Journalism's Barbed-Wire Frontier," Carol Burnett Fund Lecture on Journalism Ethics, University of Hawaii-Manoa, (March 3, 1982).

[6] After 'Jimmy's World': Tightening Up In Editing (New York: The National News Council, 1981); Douglas A. Anderson, "How Newspaper Editors Reacted to Post's Pulitzer Prize Hoax," Journalism Quarterly, 59:363-366, (Autumn, 1982); K. Tim Wulfemeyer, "The Effects of the Janet Cooke Case on the Policies and Practices of Large Newspapers and Television Stations," Newspaper Research Journal (in press).

[7] John B. Adams, "The Relative Credibility of 20 Unnamed News Sources," Journalism Quarterly, 39:79-82, (Winter, 1962); John B. Adams, "Unnamed Sources and the News: A Follow-Up Study," Journalism Quarterly, 41:262-264, (Spring, 1964); Daniel Riffe, "Relative Credibility Revisited: How 18 Unnamed Sources Are Rated," Journalism Quarterly, 57:618-623, (Winter, 1980).

[8] Hugh M. Culbertson and Nancy Somerick, "Variables Affect How Persons View Unnamed Sources," Journalism Quarterly, 54:58-69, (Spring, 1977); Rebecca Pratt and Robert George, "A Searching of Conscience," Newsweek, 92:50-51, (May 4, 1981).

[9] Fred Fedler and Tim Counts, "Variations in Attribution Affect Readers' Evaluations of Stories," Newspaper Research Journal, 2:25-34, (April, 1981).

[10] Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Leaks to the Press as Communication Within and Between Organizations," Newspaper Research Journal, 1:53-58, (February, 1980); Edward Jay Epstein, Between Fact and Fiction (New York, Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 3-32.

[11] Stephen Hess, The Washington Reporters (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1981), pp. 19-20.

[12] Hugh M. Culbertson, "Veiled Attribution--An Element of Style?," Journalism Quarterly, 55:456-465, (Autumn, 1978).

[13] Michael Ryan, "Reports, Inferences and Judgments in News Coverage of Social Issues," Journalism Quarterly, 56:497-503, (Autumn, 1979).

[14] Culbertson, supra note 12.

[15] Warren K. Agee, Phillip H. Ault and Edwin Emery, Introduction to Mass Communications (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), pp; 66, 125-126; Ray E. Hiebert, Donald F. Ungurait and Thomas W. Bohn, Mass Media III (New York: Longman, Inc., 1982), pp. 442-444; Donald N. Wood, Mass Media and the Individual (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 86-87; Jay Black and Frederick C. Whitney, Introduction to Mass Communication (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1983), pp. 89-90.

[16] Specific dates of the issues are available from the author.

[17] The author did all of the coding. As a check, an assistant coded two issues each of "Time" and "Newsweek." Agreement was 100% on the placing of the 67 stories into "national" or "international" categories.

[18] Culbertson used four additional categories of anonymous sources that were not recognized in this study: (1)A named organization; (2)An unnamed organization; (3)A media-related institution; and (4)A nation. Agreement between the author and his assistant on the coding for the presence of anonymous sources was 100%.

[19] Association included: colleague, friend, associate, acquaintance, loyalist and insider. High Status included: official, leader, authority, strategist, policymaker and planner. Neutral included: observer, spectator, listener and witness. Subordinates included: aide, spokesman, staffer, assistant, adviser, deputy and lieutenant. Pro/Con included: supporter, defender, critic, enemy, backer, detracter, admirer, ally, booster and comrade. Experts included: expert, analyst, scholar, researcher and investigator. Agreement between the author and his assistant on the placement of sources within the categories was 93%.

[20] International stories quoted anonymous sources more often than did national stories. (X^2=10.48, df=1, p=.001)

[21] Multiple attributions to the same anonymous source within a given story were counted as one reference when determining how many "different" officials, aides, diplomats, experts, sources, staffers and advisers were quoted. TABLE 2 reflects this coding policy.

[22] R. Edward Jackson, letter to author, (February 18, 1983).

FIGURE 1

Percentages of Newsmagazine Stories Quoting Anonymous Sources

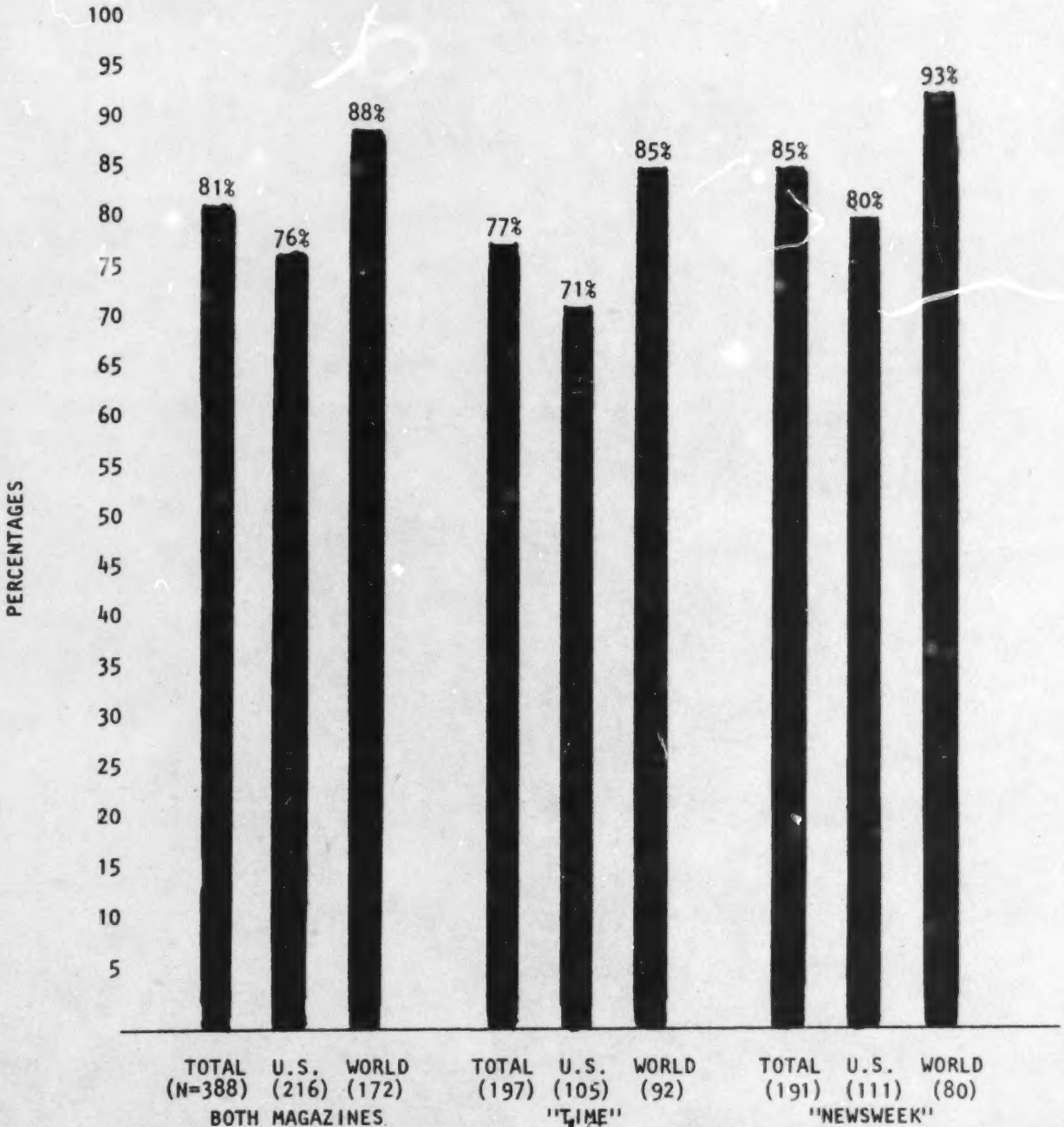

TABLE 1

"Types" of Anonymous Sources Quoted in Percent by Magazine and Location

TYPE	BOTH MAGAZINES			"TIME"			"NEWSWEEK"		
	TOTAL (N=1085)	U.S. (480)	WORLD (605)	TOTAL (503)	U.S. (203)	WORLD (300)	TOTAL (582)	U.S. (277)	WORLD (305)
Associates	4%	5%	3%	3%	5%	1%	5%	5%	5%
High Status	39	37	41	37	36	38	40	37	43
Neutral	25	18	31	27	19	34	24	18	29
Subordinates	15	24	8	18	29	9	13	20	7
Pro/Con	6	7	5	6	6	6	6	7	5
Experts	11	9	12	9	5	12	12	13	11

TABLE 2

Specific Anonymous Source Words Used in Absolute Frequency by Magazine and Location

TYPE	BOTH MAGAZINES TOTAL	U.S.	World	"TIME" TOTAL	U.S.	WORLD	"NEWSWEEK" TOTAL	U.S.	WORLD
Aides	112	84	28	58	43	15	54	41	13
Officials	240	124	116	108	53	55	132	71	61
Diplomats	65	14	51	33	8	25	32	6	26
Experts	61	22	39	32	7	25	29	15	14
Sources	44	13	31	10	3	7	34	10	24
Staffers	42	28	14	16	8	8	26	20	6
Advisers	17	13	4	12	10	2	5	3	2